

MISS BRETHERTON

By MRS. HUMPHREY WARD,
AUTHOR OF "ROBERT ELSMER."

CHAPTER VII.

It was a rainy November night. A soft, continuous downpour was soaking the London streets, hurrying the footmen, and giving animation to the nocturnal brightness of the capital, for the brilliance of the gas lamps was flushed back from impenetrable patches of water, and every ray of light seemed to be broken by the rain into a hundred shimmering reflections. It was the hour when all the society of which an autumnal London can boast is in the streets, hurrying to its dinner or its amusement, and when the stream of diners out, flowing through the different channels of the west, is met in all the great thoroughfares by the stream of theatre goers setting eastward.

The western end of D— street was especially crowded, and so was the entrance to a certain narrow street leading to the courtyard of the Callopie. Outside the theatre itself there was a dense mass of carriages and human beings, only kept in order by the constant pressure of the police, and wavering to and fro with kaleidoscopic rapidity. The line of carriages seemed interminable, and after those who emerged from the theatre, a great multitude outside, they had to face the stern order of the struggling well-dressed crowd within, surging up the double staircase of the newly decorated theatre. The air inside was full of the hum of talk, and the whole crowd had a homogeneous, almost a family air, as the theatre of a great London season had been poured into the theatre. Everybody seemed to know everybody else; there were politicians and artists, and writers of books, known and unknown; there were fair women and wise women and great ladies; and there was that large substratum of faithful, but comparatively nameless, persons who, as a successful manager learns to depend with some confidence on any first night of importance.

And this was a first night of exceptional importance. No less, indeed, had been the competition for tickets, that many of those present had as vague and confused an idea of how they came to be among the favored multitude pouring into the Callopie as a man on a street pass has of the deities by which he has struggled past the barrier which has overthrown his neighbor. Miss Bretherton's first appearance in "Elvira" had been the subject of conversation for weeks past among a far larger number of London circles than generally concern themselves with theatrical affairs. Among those who might be said to be within a certain literary and artistic circle, people were able to give definite grounds for the public interest. The play, it was said, was an unusually good one, and the progress of the rehearsals had let loose a flood of rumors to the effect that Miss Bretherton's acting in it would be a great surprise to the public. Further, from the intellectual circle of things, it was only known that the famous beauty had returned to the scene of her triumphs, and that now, as in the season, one of the first articles of the social dialogue laid it down as necessary that you should, first of all, have seen her, and secondly, know her—by fair means, if possible, if not, by crooked ones—in society.

It was nearly a quarter to 8. The orchestra had taken their places and almost every seat was full. In one of the dress circle boxes sat three people who had arrived early, and had for some time enjoyed themselves in making a study of the incoming stream through their opera glasses. They were Eustace Kendall, his sister, Mme. de Chateaux, and her husband. The Chateauxs had traveled over Paris expressly for the occasion, and Mme. de Chateaux, her gray blue eyes sparkling with expectation and all her small, delicate features alive with interest and animation, was watching for the rising of the heavy velvet curtain with an eagerness which brought down upon her the occasional mockery of her husband, who was in reality, however, little less excited than herself. It was but three weeks since they had parted with Isabel Bretherton in Paris, and they were feeling on this first night something of the anxiety and responsibility which parents feel when they launch a child upon whom they have expended their best efforts into a critical world.

As for Eustace, he also had but that afternoon arrived in London. He had been paying a long day visit to some aged relatives in the north, and had so lengthened it out, in accordance with the whim which had taken possession of him in Surrey, that he had missed all the preparations for "Elvira," and had arrived upon the scene only at the moment when the final coup was to be delivered. Miss Bretherton had herself sent him a note of invitation, containing an order for the first night and an appeal to come and "judge me as kindly as truth will let you." And he had answered her that, whatever happened, he would be in his place in the Callopie on the night of the 20th of November.

And now here he was, wearing outwardly precisely the same aspect of interested expectancy as those around him, and all the time conscious inwardly that to him alone, of all the human beings in that vast theatre, the experience of the evening would be so vitally and desperately important that life on the other side of it would be a waste of time forever. It was a burden to him that his sister suspected nothing of his state of feeling; it would have consoled him that she should know it, but it seemed to him impossible to tell her.

"There are the Stuarths," he said, bending down to her, as the orchestra struck up, "in the box to the left of mine, I suppose, will join them when it begins. I am looking for them working like a horse for this play. Every detail in it, they say, is perfect, artistically and historically, and the time of preparation has been exceptionally short. Why did she refuse to begin again with the 'White Lady' to give herself more time?"

"I cannot tell," said Eustace, with a shrug and a reluctance that he could not get over. "I believe her associations with the play were so painful that it would have seemed an evil omen to her to begin a new season with it." "Was she well, I wonder?"

"I think she did well to follow her fancy in the matter, and she will have such a rest of time. She was working at it all the weeks she was with us, and young Harting, too, I think, had noticed enough. Some of the smaller parts may go readily tonight, but they will soon fall into shape."

"Poor Wallace!" said Eustace, "he must be wishing it well over. I never saw a house better stocked with endowments." "Here he is!" cried Mme. de Chateaux, betraying her suppressed excitement in her nervous little start. "Oh, Mr. Wallace, how do you do and how are things?"

Poor Wallace threw himself into his seat, looking the picture of misery so far as his face, which Nature had modeled in one of her choicest moods, was capable of it.

"My dear Mme. de Chateaux, I have no more notion than the man in the moon. Miss Bretherton is a dear, and with a few Forbes' a should have collected a hundred times already, and that's about all I know. As for the other part, I suppose you mean the sketch in the paper, but at present I feel like a man at the foot of the gallows. There goes the bell, now for it."

The sketch for the first night of "Elvira" had been found among the papers of a young penniless Italian, who had died almost of starvation in his Roman garret, during those terrible years after 1830, when poverty grew on every hedge and the romanticism was abroad. The sketch had appeared in a little privately printed volume which Eustace had picked up in the cloister of the Paris quays. He had read it in an idle hour in a railway, had seen its capabilities, and had forthwith set to work to develop the sketch into a play. But in developing it he had carefully preserved the character of the original conception. It was a conception strictly of the Romantic, having, affecting the imagination or the nocturnal brightness of the capital, for the brilliance of the gas lamps was flushed back from impenetrable patches of water, and every ray of light seemed to be broken by the rain into a hundred shimmering reflections. It was the hour when all the society of which an autumnal London can boast is in the streets, hurrying to its dinner or its amusement, and when the stream of diners out, flowing through the different channels of the west, is met in all the great thoroughfares by the stream of theatre goers setting eastward.

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Miss Bretherton's last recall was over, and the box was filled in its absence with a stream of friends and a constant murmur of conversation which was music in the ears of Mme. de Chateaux, and, for the moment, silenced in Kendall his own throbbing and desolate consciousness.

"There never was a holiday turned to such good account before," a gray haired dramatic critic was saying to her, a man with whose keen, good natured face London had been familiar for the last twenty years, and whose magic has touched the beauty of Mme. de Chateaux; "last spring we felt as though one fairy godmother at least had been left out at the christening. And now it would seem as though even she had repented of it and brought her gift with the rest. Well, well; I always felt there was something at the bottom in that nature that might blossom in the future. Most people who are younger at the trade than I would not hear of it. I was commonly agreed that her success would be just as long as the first freshness of her beauty, and no more. And now—English stage has laid its hold at last upon a great actress."

Mme. de Chateaux's smiling reply was broken by the reappearance of Wallace, round whom the buzz of congratulatory words with fresh vigor.

"How is she?" asked Mme. de Chateaux, "is she as well as her arm?" "Tired!" "Not the least! But, of course, all the strain is not. It is amazing, you know, this reception. It's almost as though she had been acting. For, the wings, looking on, is a play in himself."

In another minute the hubbub had swept out again, and the house had settled into its usual, quiet, and even, and the English stage has laid its hold at last upon a great actress."

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Mrs. Stuart, who was as communicative and amusing as usual, and who chattered away to him till he suddenly saw Miss Bretherton signaling to him with her arm in that of his sister.

"Do you know, Mr. Kendall," she said as he went up to her, "you must really take Mme. de Chateaux away out of this noise and crowd! It is all very well for her to go, but take her to your rooms and get her some food. How I wish I could entertain you here, but with this crowd it is impossible."

"Isabel, my dear Isabel," cried Mme. de Chateaux, looking her, "can't you slip away too, and leave Mr. Wallace to do the honors? There will be nothing left of you to-morrow."

"Yes, directly, directly! Only I feel as if sleep were a thing that did not exist for me. But you must certainly go. Take her, Mr. Kendall; doesn't she look a wreck? I will tell Mr. de Chateaux and send him after you."

She took Marie's shawl from Kendall's arm and put it tenderly round her; then she slipped down into her eyes, and a low "Good night, best and kindest of friends," and the brother and sister hurried away. Kendall dropping the hand which had been cordially shaken out to him.

"Do you mind, Eustace," said Mme. de Chateaux, as they walked across the stage, "I ought to go, and the party ought to break up. But I will shame to carry you off from many friends."

"Mind! Why, I have ordered supper for you in my rooms, and it is just midnight. I hope the people will have the sense to go soon. Now, then, for a cab."

They waited at the gate of the Temple, and as they walked across the quadrangle under a glow of light, she said a low "Good night, best and kindest of friends," and the brother and sister hurried away. Kendall dropping the hand which had been cordially shaken out to him.

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